THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION

For 121 Years the South's Standard Newspaper

Copyright © 1989 The Atlanta Constitution

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1989 ★★★★★

In Training, Free Choice is the Key

By Werner Erhard
Special to The Atlanta Constitution

SAUSALITO, Calif. — Jobs, a healthy economy and an improving quality of life are high priorities for Americans in the 90's. Our ability to achieve these goals will depend in no small measure on an effective response by American businesses to tough new challenges — a shrinking work force, rapid technological advances, rising global competition and a cultural diversity in our work force unlike any we've seen in the past.

These challenges have already placed unfamiliar and critical demands on employers and employees alike. Already, we face a growing need to develop entry-level skills among workers from an ever greater range of educational backgrounds, ethnic traditions and abilities. As technologies change, we also need to retrain and re-educate even skilled and experienced workers to enable them to keep pace with new methods and new demands.

Businesses that flourish and excel in the years ahead will be those that recognize employees as one of the key variables in building a competitive edge.

Most businesses have policies and programs to promote the training of employees; and most employees view such training as a pathway to advancement and success. Yet, the notion that advancement depends on training has, in many cases, helped foster a climate of grudging acceptance among the very employees who have most at stake.

Often, training programs have been perceived not as an opportunity or benefit but as a condition of the job — another in a long series of demands placed on a work force that already sees itself as overtaxed. Where such a climate is allowed to persist, training programs have little hope for success.

The success of any training depends on the environment provided by the managers involved. Those training programs that produce outstanding results — that serve both organizational and individual needs — are those that respect each employee's autonomy and freedom of choice.

In fact, it is largely on the basis of the employee's request or desire for training that such training can be of real value to the individual and the organization. Only when we're free to say "no" can our "yes" be said with power, dignity and strength.

The concept of voluntary participation is not a new one. Yet, until we have altered the corporate climate in which training occurs, managers will often be seen as exerting subtle, or even direct, pressure on employees to accept such training; and employees will continue to resist such training.

To address this climate, American business must make significant progress in the way it motivates, develops and engages employees. To be effective, managers must elicit the request for training and development directly from the employee.

Fundamental to generating this demand is the perceived advantage that training has for helping participants reach their own personal and organizational goals. It is the responsibility of both employer and employee to be clear about the nature, content, objectives and methods of the training programs, as well as the benefits they provide.

The greatest successes are achieved when employees request training, and not just agree to attend, on the basis of their own confidence in the opportunity it provides.

Effective training must recognize and build on the contribution that each worker already makes while providing the opportunity to move even further ahead.

Guaranteeing the employee's right to such initiative honors his or her individuality and freedom of choice. Moreover, it allows for maximum value to be produced from the training and invites employees to serve as models to their colleagues.

Reprinted from the *Atlanta Constitution*, Wednesday, October 11, 1989